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# Attuning to the webs of *en*

## Ontography, Japanese spirit worlds, and the “tact” of Minakata Kumagusu

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An experiment in ethnographic theory, this article aims to find new ways of getting Japanese spirit worlds into view. In the attempt to find ways of repopulating spirit worlds with more than beliefs, socioeconomic realities, and politics, the broader “ontographic” issue is how to facilitate engagement with spirits in a way that is not overdetermined by the assumption that such entities do not really exist. After examining how Japanese folklore studies and so-called “monsterology” framed their questions around concerns with beliefs, we explore the thought of the maverick scientist Minakata Kumagusu. In his work we find an original, proto-ontological perspective, centering on “tactful” encounters and modes of attunement unfolding in cosmic webs of *en*.

Keywords: Japan, ontology, animism, spirit worlds, tact

In “Freedom of expression: The very modern practice of visiting a Shinto shrine” (2000), John Nelson takes his readers on a tour of the Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto, a tranquil space of lawns and courtyards, encircled by verdant woodland. Here and there around the grounds are smaller shrines dedicated to a range of subsidiary deities, as well as the main hall, in which the principal divinity, Wake Ikazuchi, is enshrined. Clapping, bowing, and making small offerings of money, people come pray to these divinities. But far from all visits to the site are undertaken for purposes of worship; visitors might be sightseeing, picnicking, or simply passing by. By night, the shrine is used for such diverse activities as radio-controlled car racing, firefly watching, and nocturnal tête-à-têtes (ibid.: 48–50). Nelson observes that the shrine is a flexible space of distraction and recreation, as well as worship; a heterotopic

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space, in which forms of “freedom of expression” go hand in hand with a certain detachment from the supposedly rigid requirements of everyday Japanese life.

Throughout his ethnographic ambit, Nelson maintains a rigorous empiricism; he will only show us what he can *see*: the buildings, the behaviors—the physical business of visiting the shrine. What is difficult to ascertain is whether the ostensibly “religious” activities on display are accompanied by corresponding religious feelings or beliefs: “Observations showed that a majority of individuals coming to the shrine do interact in some way with the spiritual and visual ideology of the site, yet few of these individuals would describe themselves as ‘worshippers’” (2000: 51). Here, however, his empiricism begins to slip: for, strictly speaking, interaction with a “spiritual ideology” is not something one can *observe*.

Nelson’s substitution of “interacting with ideology” for “relating to divinities” exemplifies an approach that transforms the tricky invisibility of spiritual beings into other intangible, though more academically respectable, entities—like ideology, economy, or culture.<sup>1</sup>

An experiment in anthropological theory, the present article aims to find new ways of getting spirit worlds, and, specifically, Japanese spirit worlds, into view. This endeavor is premised on a sense that something is missing in many existing theories of spirits and supernatural beings. In the early days, many studies centered on the cognitive deficiencies or flawed beliefs of those who claimed the existence of such phenomena. Some scholars engaged in more activist struggles against superstition. Later, as more cultural relativist sensibilities took over, the emphasis shifted to the study of spirits and witchcraft as instantiating diverse forms of sociality (e.g., Geschiere 2013), or modes of political resistance (e.g., Taussig 1980; Comaroff 1985). While spirits are no longer seen as figments of belief, they are now generally interpreted as responses to broader social and cultural realities. Notwithstanding their significant differences, these diverse approaches are broadly similar in one sense: they depict spiritual beings as primarily reactive.

As the literary scholar Stanley Fish (1980: 1) has written (in quite a different context), “The field of enquiry is *constituted* by the questions we are able to ask” (original emphasis). Complementarily, the questions we are able to ask have everything to do with what we are capable of conceiving the field to be populated *by*. The present discussion therefore entertains the possibility (which is not, of course, a guarantee) of eliciting the voices, actions, and bodies of spirits and divinities in ways that do not a priori evacuate them of reality. Accordingly, we experiment with repopulating the field of inquiry with *more than* beliefs, socioeconomic realities, and politics. The broader issue is how to facilitate engagement with spirits in a way that is not overdetermined by the assumption that such entities do not really exist.

What we refer to below as an *ontographic* engagement with anthropological theory is particularly inflected by the fact that our point of departure is Japanese spirit worlds. For one thing, there are specificities to Japanese spirits, including their vast numbers and wide variability. For another, a long history of Japanese and foreign

1. For an attempt to place spirits on an equal explanatory footing as other such apparently empirically invisible entities as culture, economy, “the market,” and so on, see Blanes and Espírito Santo (2014).

scholarship has interpreted spirits in ways that partly overlap with, and partly differ from, scholarship elsewhere.

After outlining some of the central stakes for anthropological theory, we examine how Japanese folklore studies and so-called “monsterology” framed their questions around concerns with beliefs. Later, in some ways analogous to the transformation of anthropological theory elsewhere, these forms of inquiry gave way to interpretations that centered on the nationalist politics of spirits.

In the second half of the article we turn to the work of the maverick scientist Minakata Kumagusu. We find in his work an original perspective on how spiritual beings and people encounter one another in cosmic webs, and on how to engage with such webs. For Minakata, the key to accessing these webs of *en* was the cultivation of what he called “tact.” Apparently, this notion originated from his encounters with Western science. In Minakata’s interpretation, however, tact was given an ontological dimension, as it was parsed through readings of esoteric Buddhism. Adding another layer to this complicated set of translations, we suggest that Minakata’s tact in turn offers a vantage point for reconsidering some problems anthropologists have with spirits. By articulating the ontological traffic and translation between theories and methods for studying spirit worlds,<sup>2</sup> the article further aims to contribute to the repopulation of, and engagement with, such worlds not only in Japan but also elsewhere.

### Resisting bifurcation: An ontography of spirits

In the Japanese context, an extensive literature routinely expounds on the difficulties of differentiating “religion,” “spirituality,” “magic,” and “ritual” (see, e.g., Fitzgerald 2000: 159–98; Isomae 2003; Josephson 2012). It is also common knowledge that the population of spiritual entities is immense. Efforts to classify the heterogeneous population of deities (*kamigami*), ancestor spirits (*senzo*), ghosts (*yūrei*), and monsters (*bakemono*) resemble nothing so much as what *Moby Dick*’s protagonist Ishmael, with reference to the study of cetology, called the “classification of the constituents of a chaos” (Melville [1851] 1992: 145).

There are further complications. On the one hand, as the anthropologist Alan Macfarlane has noted, in Japan, “everything is imbued with ‘spirit’ or *kami*—pots, computers, goldfish, space, time, tea, stones, *sumo*, peaches, echoes” (2007: 202). On the other hand, “there is no God or gods and there is no separate supernatural world” (ibid.: 186). So spirits appear simultaneously everywhere or nowhere. But in this case, he wonders, “with what can ritual communicate?”

Yet Macfarlane’s question assumes both too much and too little. Too much, because the general recognition of animist tendencies in Japan notwithstanding, not everything is, or has been, “kamified” (Herbert 1967). And too little, because

2. “Spirit worlds” should be understood as a compressed expression, an encapsulation of complex realities along the same lines as the phenomenological shorthand “lifeworlds”. Like lifeworlds, spirit worlds are evidently not configured in the same way across contexts.

whatever it is that all of these rituals and practices communicate with, it is certainly not *nothing*. But how, then, to get this “not nothing” into view?

Anthropology has developed a rich palette of responses to this question. In his path-breaking study, Roy Rappaport (1979: 178) argued that anthropologists tended to approach the question of occult efficacy as based either on the “affective force and persuasiveness of ritual performance” or on “certain characteristics of language.” Recent sophisticated treatments along these lines see ritual as performing people and relations, for example by instantiating a “poiesis of history” and by “articulating a historical consciousness composed of multiple voices” (Lambek 2013: 9–11).

Another influential body of work has focused more specifically on the political dimensions of spirits (e.g., Taussig 1980; Comaroff 1985). Indeed, Todd Sanders (2008: 108) has argued that the politicization of spirits has “become the anthropological orthodoxy in many quarters.” Peter Geschiere (2013), for example, sees witchcraft as a means of coping with modern political developments.<sup>3</sup> In the Japanese context, Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939), a contemporary of Inoue Enryō and Yanagita Kunio, whose approaches to spirits we examine below, insisted with poetic force that monsters belong at the heart of modernization: “I want to put them in a place where a train’s bell is audible in the middle of Edo” (Figal 1999: 166). Yet, though it is undeniable that spirits and politics are related in various important ways, the consequence of elevating politics to an explanatory principle is that spirit practices become strictly derivative formations.

In arguing that “politics” as a category may itself be shaped by spirits, Nils Bubandt’s “Interview with an ancestor” (2009) introduces a subtle shift in orientation. For in this case, political categories cannot function as independent explanatory principles of spirit worlds. Rather than being determined by politics, they may transform it. Of course, they would not do so all by themselves, but in interaction with a complex set of forces (Boddy 2013: 445).

If we turn to studies of animism, Graham Harvey (2013: 6) observes that this domain, too, has been depicted in widely differing ways. Some scholars view animism as a characteristic of certain religions, whereas others describe it as a cognitive phenomenon, and yet others, Harvey notes, use the term to direct “attention towards the continuous interrelation of all beings or of matter itself.” This latter mode of directed attention connects with our ontographic interest in coming to terms with “several ways to exist” (Latour 2013: 201). Whatever the modes of existence of spirits are, our premise is that room must be created for them to operate as something more than psychological symptoms or sociopolitical reactions (see also Blanes and Espírito Santo 2014).<sup>4</sup>

3. Other studies on magic, witchcraft, and spirit possession analyze these phenomena not merely in terms of a critique of modernity, but as constitutive of it (e.g., Behrend and Luig 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2002). These approaches remain wedded to the idea that the most important anthropological dimension of spirits is their role and function in political discourse. For critiques of this tendency, see Kapferer (2003) and Ishii (2013).

4. That spirits in Japan are to be taken as social, psychological, or political indices is the premise adopted variously by Davis (1980), McVeigh (1996: 285), Borgen (1997), and

Focusing on the ways in which spirit worlds are made and populated, the present discussion gives a particular inflection to the “ontological turn” (Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014). An ontological orientation is especially interesting in the Japanese context, where such approaches have hardly been deployed, and have yet to have much impact (Swift 2010; but see; Clammer 2001; Jensen and Morita 2012; Kasuga and Jensen 2012; Swift 2012).

Martin Holbraad (2009) argues for “ontography” as an anthropological method. In the context of spirit worlds, however, the term has an older and, for our purposes, more pertinent origin, since the protagonist of one of the celebrated Victorian writer M. R. James’ (2013: 76) ghost stories was no less than a professor of ontography. Our adaptation of this term is premised on construing (spirit) alterity as a question of *worlds* rather than *worldviews*, a switch in emphasis the import of which we detail in the following section.

For a start, however, we can note that one important reason for adopting an ontographic approach is to avoid what Alfred North Whitehead (1920: 30) described as the

bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality, which, in so far as they are real, are real in different senses. One reality would be the entities such as electrons which are the study of speculative physics. This would be the reality which is there for knowledge, although on this theory it is never known. For what is known is the other sort of reality, which is the byplay of the mind.

As Whitehead argued, the bifurcation of nature creates a dichotomy between the realm of primary qualities, like “molecules and electric waves,” and “merely subjective” secondary qualities, like the experience of seeing something “red” (ibid.: 29).

Whitehead insisted that “for natural philosophy everything perceived is in nature. We may not pick and choose” (ibid.). Thus he adamantly rejected any “theory of psychic addition to the object” (ibid.) along with the aspiration to partition “what is in the mind and what is in nature” (ibid.: 30). Transposed to the realm of spirit worlds, such bifurcation precludes the attempt to come to terms with the various forms of existence that spirits or their kin may have.

## Worlds and worldviews: Experiment and equivocation

Obviously, the switch from worldviews to worlds, or from epistemology to ontology, raises many questions (Gad, Jensen, and Winthereik, 2015). After all, do we not also bring along epistemological presuppositions, theories, and concepts, even unquestioned beliefs? Moreover, might our assumptions not be at odds with those of our informants, thus contradicting their worlds? Clearly, it is insufficient to simply assert that “there is spirit stuff, there is spirit affliction, it isn’t a matter of metaphor or symbol, or even psychology” (Turner 1993: 9, original emphasis; cf. Ishii 2013). Yet, although the epistemological objection is important, it is neither intractable,

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Shimazono (2004: 176). For an important historical study that counters this tendency, see Faure (2016).



nor ultimately fatal for an ontographic approach. For while it goes without saying that there are many perspectives or worldviews, it is not quite obvious what is entailed by this proliferation.

For one thing, the bifurcation between facts (what the world *is*) and perspectives or epistemologies (how the world is *viewed*) to which Whitehead objected is itself embedded in Western ontology. However, this ontology is not made up exclusively of perspectives, since, as exemplified by Jonathan Crary's (1990) "techniques of the observer" (among other things), perspectives are also themselves enabled by material transformations. Technological and scientific equipment, that is, *generates* perspectives, theories, and epistemologies, including the ability of Westerners to think of the world as objective in the first place. Indeed, the very capacity to think of the world *as bifurcated* is an outcome of specific transformations in the practical and materialized ontologies of the West.

None of this means that perspectives, worldviews, or epistemologies vanish, or even that they lose importance. Instead, it means that all perspectives, our own included, are a subset of worlds that are also made up of many other things. The implication is that while worldviews are part of practical ontologies and affect them in multiple ways, the former are not coextensive with the latter. One entailment is that anthropologists are in the business of comparing ontologies that *contain* multiple epistemologies rather than *consisting only, or predominantly*, of epistemologies. Hence, again, lies our interest in spirit *ontography*.

Another consequence, however, is the impossibility of *fully* taking leave of one's own ontology. In fact, this is a variant of critics' insistent objection that—protests notwithstanding—"ontologists" are still beholden to their own assumptions or, indeed, as we would say, to their own worlds. Yet, rather than a damning contradiction, this simply means that any attempt to grapple with other worlds will be premised on equivocation. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004: 10) wrote, the point is not to try to "unmake the equivocation" but rather to "dwell there," which means to "open and widen the space imagined not to exist between the conceptual languages in contact . . . to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocality" (cf. Lambek 1998). The point, in short, is that a sustained effort must be made to control the equivocation.

Below we argue that the controlled equivocation entailed by the effort to activate spirit worlds requires tact and attunement. But tuning in to other worlds does not mean fusing them. At issue, rather, is a process of mutual interference. Thus, our analysis can be described as itself an ontological meshwork, in which our worlds interact with those of Japanese spirits, and those of Minakata, who, moreover, himself embodied a complicated ontological mixture of Western science and esoteric Buddhism.

This is why we describe our inquiry as having an experimental dimension. It is experimental in the sense of entailing risk and uncertainty, since we cannot be certain in advance of our ability to control the equivocation between our worlds and spirit worlds, and also in the different sense of aspiring to an improved ability to discriminate between ways of apprehending and engaging with spirit worlds. While we are interested in allowing spirits to speak differently to us, at issue is therefore also how we will thereby be allowed to speak differently about other things—such as spirit worlds, ontography, or, indeed, anthropological theory.

## Tapping into spirit realms

In *Natural reflections: Human cognition at the nexus of science and religion*, Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2009: 11) wrote that: “Throughout our lives we interact with our environments in ways that continuously modify our structures and how they operate, and these structural and functional modifications affect our subsequent interactions with our environments, both in what we perceive and how we behave.” Aligning with this pragmatist observation, some of the most promising alternatives to approaches that psychologize and politicize spirits have focused on processes of embodiment and materialization. Yet, from the point of view of an ontography of spirit worlds, an exclusive emphasis on materialization carries with it its own risks.

Consider, for example, Inge Daniels’ (2003, 2010) fascinating studies of luck and spirituality in Japan. Explicit about the importance of materialization, Daniels studies *engimono*, omnipresent good luck charms, which are at once spiritual devices and commercial products, and *ichimatsu* dolls, given to children to “absorb evil.” Dolls, charms, and people, she observes, are “experienced as intermingled agencies” (Daniels 2010: 167).

Daniels’ analyses show dolls and charms to be channels through which luck travels. As spiritual conduits, Daniels (2003: 633) argues, these entities exhibit no clear separation between the material and the symbolic, for these dimensions are “inextricably entwined.” The argument resonates with Philip Swift’s contention that Japanese spirituality does not depend on the Western opposition between the created and the made, since spiritual agency is effective to the extent that it is fabricated (Swift 2010; see also Latour 1999).

Yet, in spite of her attentiveness to the “intermingling” of bodies, Daniels’ project remains resolutely anthropocentric. Thus, she argues that “the anthropological study of religion has been compromised by . . . its respect for *belief and supernatural beings*” (Daniels 2010: 153, our emphasis). The turn to materiality and embodiment, in other words, functions as a bulwark not only against “belief” but also against “supernatural beings,” which are seen, precisely, *as* beliefs. And this collapse is far from coincidental. After all, supernatural beings epitomize the “beliefs” that caused such explanatory problems for the anthropology of spirits, magic, and religion in the first place. If beliefs go down the analytical drain, it is thus little surprise that supernatural beings tend to be flushed out with them.

In order to get spirit worlds into view, a focus on processes of embodiment and materialization is in one sense a step forward, since it holds the potential to confer on spiritual beings forms of liveliness that they lack when rendered as symbols and beliefs. Thus, for example, *ichimatsu* dolls and *engimono* can embed vital energies. As further exemplified by Daniels, however, a material emphasis can also whisk spirits away. Material and bodily practices can be used to keep spirits firmly out of sight since “we all know” that they are not material.

It is not difficult to see why a material emphasis may work against the ambition to keep spirit worlds in sight. After all, lack of *observability* has long caused well-known methodological anxieties in the study of witchcraft, spirits, and ghosts. Thus, Hans-Peter Duerr (1985: 67) reminds us that the Winnebago “do not say what the spirits *are*, but what they are not” (original emphasis). “Of course demons are not ordinary objects of experience,” he continues: “We do not *meet* them in



everyday life” and “the scientist will look for them in vain” (ibid.: 69, original emphasis). Of course, it may also be that spirit and demons do not want to be seen under just any circumstances. Theories focusing on beliefs, discourses, symbols, politics, and materialization each offer their own paths out of this *aporia*.

Yet, whether we do not *meet* spirits in everyday life obviously also depends on who “we” are. Inasmuch as “we” are middle-of-the-road Westerners, including would-be ethnographers of spirit worlds, perhaps it is true to say that we tend to “look in vain” (Duerr 1985: 69; but see Favret-Saada 1980; Stoller and Olkes 1987; West 2007). However, following Smith’s argument, this would simply be in consequence of the fact that the bodily and perceptual capacities of members of this collective have generally not been modified in ways that allow for interaction with spirit ecologies. There is thus an ontological dimension to “seeing” aside from what immediately meets the eye. Moreover, as both Duerr and Smith emphasize, the capacity to encounter other beings is subject to modification.

Rather than deploying a resolutely material focus in order to steer clear of the problem posed by supernatural beings, we might therefore imagine a different kind of inquiry. At issue would be a process of learning to become affected by foreign environments, finding ways of *tapping into* different realms. It is with a view to just this possibility that we turn to the work of Minakata Kumagusu. To provide context and contrast, however, we first examine some of the predominant ways in which matters of spirit(s) have been dealt with in the Japanese context.

## Spirited away: Folklore studies and monsterology in Japan

An interest in Japanese spirits is by no means novel. Indeed, Japanese folklore (*minzokugaku*), and to a lesser extent monsterology (*yōkaigaku*), has given rise to an “immense literature” (Figal 1999: 8). In this section we contrast the research programs defined by Inoue Enryō (1858–1919), the father of Japanese “monsterology,” with folklore studies as initiated by Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962). In different ways, these figures are important because they specified agendas for spirit studies, the presuppositions and problems of which largely remain with us today.

A famous intellectual, Yanagita is generally viewed as the originator of Japanese folklore studies. This still thriving discipline centers on collating, identifying, and cataloguing the facts of the folk, including their mysterious experiences. Writing around the same time, Inoue, affectionately known as “Dr. Monster,” specified a research agenda, which he named “monsterology.” Using the terminology of Michel de Certeau, Gerald Figal (1999: 118) has argued that both of these intellectuals engaged a “problem of the ‘redistribution of epistemological terrain.’” That redistribution had to do with determining the boundaries separating natural occurrences from subjective beliefs. This terrain, however, could also be seen as ontological.

These scholars held strikingly different views of what would constitute a satisfying “redistribution.” Yet, certain similarities also tied their efforts together. For one thing, in spite of their differences, Inoue and Yanagita both located spirits within the minds of those who claimed to encounter them. Doing so, they both emptied spirits of *worldly* existence. Aside from its immediate psychologizing impetus, that evacuation paved the way for the dominant contemporary view of politicized spirits.

Though he instituted monsterology, Inoue was neither a fan of, nor a believer in, the monsters that formed the object of his study. Indeed, like his contemporary Tylor, he was committed to the “extermination of superstition” (*meishin taiji*; Inoue 1897: 10). Deploying the language of hygiene, he announced that monsterology would contribute to a “great clean-up of delusions” (*meishin no ôsôji*; *ibid.*): it was the disciplinary disinfectant that would “kill the bacteria of superstition” (*meishin no bakteria wo korosu*; *ibid.*: 16; Figal 1999: 88). Because his investigation was premised on entities like goblins and ghosts having no material foundation, the explanation for their putative existence would be sought in disorderly mental states; monsterology was thus “a branch of applied psychology” (Inoue quoted in Miura 2014: 299). In terms of material causes, he ventured that many monstrous occurrences could be traced to bodily defects, such as bad eyesight or nervous disorders (Figal 1999: 50).

Inoue organized a hierarchy of mysterious entities, including what he called “empty,” “artificial,” and “false” mysteries (*kyokai*, *gikai*, *gokai*; see Foster 2009: 82–83; Miura 2014: 306). Even so, he also posited another category, “true supernatural beings” (*shinsei no yôkai*), which existed outside the space of explanation and of knowledge. These entities inhabited a transcendent domain of wonder that Inoue named the “true mystery” (*shinkai*). As a prominent Buddhist thinker, Inoue seemingly wanted to locate a safe space where Buddha and other divinities could dwell unmolested by scientific explanation.<sup>5</sup> Yet even these divinities were stripped of any capacity to act, becoming “transformed into merely temporary names for an abstract truth” (Josephson 2006: 162).

While Inoue busied himself with whittling down the population of spiritual entities, Yanagita was organizing a campaign of conservation. Although, in Yanagita’s conception, folklore studies have interests that go considerably beyond the supernatural, the archiving and preserving of the mysterious was integral to the endeavor. Indeed, the emergence of the field is conventionally traced to Yanagita’s hugely popular 1912 publication of the “Tales of Tōno” (*Tōno Monogatari*), which was based on a series of mysterious stories told to Yanagita by Sasaki Kizen, a university-educated native of Tōno city in northern Japan. Yanagita himself was fascinated by the “twilight” (*tasogare*): at once a time where vision becomes indistinct as shadows lengthen, and a space where the objective and the imaginary blur and transform. This twilight zone was the poetic expression of his method, which aimed to tap into and understand the abiding “life-consciousness” (*seikatsu ishiki*) of the Japanese folk that survived at the margins of modernity (Yanagita 1989: 253–54, cited in Figal 1999: 113).

For Yanagita, the spirits and monsters that occupied this crepuscular realm were integral to Japanese identity (Foster 2009: 143). As for the identities and capabilities of the spirits themselves, Yanagita placed these in an evolutionary scheme according to which the powers of spirits diminished as civilization advanced. In this evolutionary demonology, a spiritual entity can possess (*tsuku*) human beings in the early stages of civilization, but at a later stage, it is only able to surprise (*odorokasu*;

5. In Inoue’s last article “Shinkai” (2000), he argued that most mysteries could be scientifically explained in terms of physical science and psychology. However, science cannot easily explain fundamental questions such as “what are things?” and “what are minds?” and thus it is rational to call these questions *shinkai* (see Shibata 2014). In this sense, Inoue’s idea of “true mystery” resembles Minakata’s “great wonder,” which we discuss later.

Yanagita 1962: 467; see Foster 2009: 155). In the most downgraded state, entities once capable of invading human bodies are reduced to going “Boo!”

At one level, Inoue and Yanagita pursued very different projects. While Inoue’s spirits would be made to disappear under the bright lights of science, Yanagita, with his more literary cast of mind, recognized an epistemological twilight zone where the real and the imaginary mingled. At another level, however, their approaches were similar. Thus, both Inoue and Yanagita were concerned with “wonder” (*fushigi*) (Tanaka 2004: 70; see also Foster 2009: 83), and both saw most wonders as human productions, subject matters that ultimately concerned the psychic realm.<sup>6</sup> Viewed thus, the difference was simply in their methods for treating the wondrous. Whereas Inoue saw most wonders as cognitive errors, Yanagita viewed them as something to be cherished: “Why is it that such unthinkable visions are realized in the brains of humans? . . . In the end, one has to say that it is human beings that are the greatest wonder in the universe” (Yanagita 1963: 376; see Foster 2009: 145).<sup>7</sup>

The historical uptake of Inoue’s and Yanagita’s efforts and the disciplinary successes of their respective endeavors have been strikingly different. Whereas monsterology is presently viewed as something like a curiosity, folklore studies remains a respectable field. Given that modernity is in part defined by its relegation of spirits and monsters to the “backwards,” this might seem like a surprising turn of events. After all, it was monsterology that adopted this enlightened stance, whereas Yanagita’s relation to supernatural beings was far more ambiguous. Yet, monsterology’s demotion to a *curiosum* can also be seen as an index of its very success. After all, Inoue aimed to eradicate his subject matter. Analogous to a medical science that would have succeeded in ridding the world of disease, with the modern demise of monsters having defeated its object, monsterology obviated itself. And thus it gradually became difficult to imagine Japanese spirits and monsters as anything but sociopsychological entities.

However, this was not quite the end of the story. For when spirits reappeared on the anthropological scene in Japan, as elsewhere, they donned the clothes of cultural politics.

## The spirit(s) of politics

With the beginning of Japanese anthropology as a professional discipline, spirits, as agents, were analytically exorcized.<sup>8</sup> Meiji period scholars strove not only to

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6. Along similar lines, Michael Scott (2013) sees wonder as an important aspect of contemporary ontological thinking.
  7. The legacy of Inoue and Yanagita as psychologists of Japanese beliefs is confirmed by Komatsu Kazuhiko, today’s leading figure of *yōkaigaku*, who describes the study of *yōkai* as “nothing other than the study of human beings who have created *yōkai*” (Komatsu 1994: 10; see also Foster 2009: 208).
  8. We speak of analytical exorcism, since political exorcism has a longer history. The latter is exemplified, for example, at Tokugawa Ieyasu’s mausoleum in Nikkō, where signs tell demons to “keep out.”

give Shinto a foundation in physical science (in conversation with Galileo and Newton) but also to define it as a political project “capable of healing the ‘body’ of the Japanese nation” (Josephson 2012: 97). As we have seen in the case of Inoue, a crucial dimension of this “healing process” was the eradication of superstitions; a process in which monsters came to be seen as “pests to the modern project” (Figal 1999: 7). Slowly but steadily they transformed from being dangerous (but real) to backwards (and unreal) (Josephson 2012: 173). Upon becoming unreal, spirits then fall prey to the “reality” of politics. This particular story continues into the present.

Sarah Thal (2002), for example, considers the far-reaching transformations that took place with the foundation of the Meiji state in the late nineteenth century. As Japan changed, so too did its deities. Following a series of edicts, divinities were subject to radical acts of identity reassignment, as they were stripped of their existing Buddhist names and affiliations in order to realign them with the requirements of national, and imperial, ritual. Thal effectively shows how various priests and institutions negotiated these changes. However, she conceives these actions as so many reactions to externally imposed demands. The priests did what they did “for political purposes . . . for economic survival” (ibid.: 399). In other words, whereas politics and the economy act, cosmology merely responds; divinities become symptoms, not agents of change. Thus, although the importance of critically examining relations between religion and politics is undeniable, one of its casualties in the Japanese context has been to turn Shinto into little more than a projection screen. The consequence has been a diminished capacity for engaging spirits and deities as anything *but* political entities (Jensen and Blok 2013).

Of course, the politicization of spirits is by no means a prerogative of Japanese intellectual life. As wryly described by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2003: 1), Tylor’s trail-blazing claim that “the science of culture is a reformer’s science” defined anthropology in general as a “‘Ghostbusters’-like enterprise.” Illustrations are visible in spirit anthropologies from Africa to Japan. However, even if the politicization of spirits in Japan in many ways resembles these broader tendencies, its manifestation is different in one significant respect. Whereas the tradition of the Comaroffs, for example, shows people engaged in occult economies, working spiritually to reinterpret and rework oppressive political and economic systems, scholars of Shinto and Japanese nationalism have routinely highlighted the *success* of the Japanese state in ridding Shinto of anything resembling spiritual content (Ivy 1995; Thomas 2001; Golley 2008). To paraphrase Jean Comaroff’s (1985) title, there is certainly a *body of power* there (the state, that is), but apparently little *spirit of resistance*.

In the following, we turn to the thought of Minakata Kumagusu for an ontographic alternative to this idea. For Minakata, as we shall see, life unfolds as an interweaving of visible and invisible webs. One can learn to navigate these orders by developing “tact.”

9. Although, regarding ghosts, perhaps “debunking” rather than “busting” might a more apt designation, since the Ghostbusters of cinematic fame were concerned to prove to an initially skeptical public that the entities they captured, and disposed of, were very real.

## Webs of *en* and *in*

Above we argued that the possibility of a more expansive engagement with spirit worlds hinges on a process of bodily, perceptual, and conceptual modification. The Japanese microbiologist Minakata Kumagusu (1867–1941), a scientific maverick and a contemporary of Yanagita and Inoue, would probably have agreed that the inability of most modern people, anthropologists included, to meet supernatural beings is due to insufficient modification. In itself, however, this says little about the kinds of change required to meet other beings. Minakata, however, offered an ingenious and, as it may now seem, proto-ontographic answer to this question. Reading his work today, one may have a feeling of traveling back to the anthropological future.

Minakata was an accomplished, though eccentric, scientist. Similar to Yanagita, he was also keenly aware of the gaps of scientific knowledge and method. In his own day, Minakata's main claim to scientific fame was his work on slime molds (*myxomycetes* and *mycetozoa*). However, he also took a keen interest in folklore and the supernatural, and he engaged in philosophical reflections on the relations between different kinds of knowledge and various kinds of phenomena.

Conceptualizing the combined set of worldly phenomena in the shape of a mandala, encompassed by the great mystery (*daifushigi*) of Dainichi Nyorai,<sup>10</sup> Minakata distinguished between “wonders” belonging to what can be roughly translated as abstract things (*koto*), concrete things (*mono*), the mind (*kokoro*), and reason (*kotowari*) (Minakata 1951: 271–75; see also Gill 1998: 158).<sup>11</sup> Not unlike Evans-Pritchard, Minakata insisted that the scientific search for the law of causality does not facilitate an understanding of all the world's relations (*en* and *in*).<sup>12</sup>

*En* (Skt. *pratyaya*) is a Buddhist term which, narrowly conceived, denotes indirect, external causes that are complemented by *in*, direct, internal causes (Nakamura et al. 1989: 76). More broadly, *en* connotes ties or relations (*enishi*), invisible orders beyond human knowledge, which form webs around all things in the universe. One can neither predict nor comprehend the design and work of *en*. However, though usually invisible, the threads<sup>13</sup> that connect humans and nonhumans may be brought to attention through unexpected meetings. Actualized through chance and coincidence, *en* forms the reason (*kotowari*) behind all things in the universe:

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10. Dainichi Nyorai (Skt. *Vairocana*), the cosmic Buddha, is a central divinity in esoteric Buddhism (Nakamura et al. 1989: 543).
  11. Deeply influenced by ideas of Shingon Buddhism (see Tsurumi 1978: 20, 82), Minakata elaborated his unique cosmology, including the “Minakata mandala” (ibid., 1992, 1998), and his ideas about wonders, *en* and *in*, science, and religion in letters to Dogi Hōryū (1854–1923), a prominent Buddhist scholar who became the chief administrator of the Shingon sect on Mount Kōya.
  12. *Innen* is a compound word composed of *in* and *en*. See below for further discussion of these terms.
  13. Japanese has several expressions in which a thread is used as an imagistic metaphor for *en*, e.g. “tying *en*” (*en-musubi*) or “cutting *en*” (*en-kiri*).



Today's science grasps (or is expected to grasp) the riddles of causality. It comprehends . . . causality or "in" (but not coincidence or "en"). . . . "En" is what emerges out of the inter-twining of one series of causes and effects with another. In order to grasp the total picture of the world, both cause and effect (*in*) and their interrelationships (*en*) should be understood. (Tsurumi 1998: 169–70; see also Minakata 1971: 391–92)

For Minakata, reasons, relations, and entities in the realm of *daifushigi* actually existed but their *manner* of existence fell outside the scope of modern science, which deals only with concrete things (cf. Chakrabarty 2000: 111). But if chance and coincidence was pivotal to understanding the ontological manner of things, how then to modify one's perceptual abilities in order to grasp them? This, Minakata suggested, required *tact*.

### Minakata's tact

It is curious to find the single unreferenced English word "tact" in the midst of Minakata's cosmological musings. In itself, however, his use of English is hardly surprising. By 1903, Minakata had lived in the Americas for five years and in London for nine. Among other things, he had studied accounting and agriculture, and worked for a traveling circus. During his lengthy stay abroad, he had also become an avid reader of the folkloristic periodical *Notes and Queries*, to which, between 1899 and 1933, he contributed more than three hundred essays.

Robert Merton and Elinor Barber (2006) have discussed the role *Notes and Queries* played in the history of the word "serendipity." Based on his reading of the Sri Lankan fairytale "The three princes of Serendip," Horace Walpole had originally coined the term in 1754 to designate "accidental sagacity." The word lived an obscure existence for over a hundred years. In the late nineteenth century, however, it came to describe the chance discoveries of collectors and scientists. The diverse usages of serendipity that flourished in the *Notes*, Merton and Barber (2006: 57) wrote, spoke to "a single fundamental tension . . . between the attribution of credit for an unexpected discovery on the one hand, and to auspicious external circumstances on the other."

In 1874, the English economist and logician William Stanley Jevons had written that "the greater the tact and industry with which a physicist applies himself to the study of nature," the higher his chance of meeting "fortunate accidents" (Jevons 1874: 164–165, cited in Merton and Barber 2006: 45). We do not know whether Minakata read this particular sentence. We do know, however, that he submitted a rejected, and subsequently lost, paper on serendipity to the *Notes* in 1904 (Shimura 2015: 134). Moreover, he continued to write on "tact" in Japanese in the years that followed.

In certain ways, Minakata's notion of tact appears similar to Jevons' formulation. It is, however, dramatically different in drawing also on reservoirs of Buddhist thought. This unusual combination created a perspective from which Minakata was able to deal with just "those 'mysterious' workings of the universe, that other men take as only the starting point for rational scientific investigation" (Merton and Barber 2006: 55).



“Things in the universe,” wrote Minakata (1951: 276, 277–78), “naturally proceed smoothly without being conscious as long as one can apprehend the reasons for such things. . . . A discovery is . . . nothing but understanding things in the universe, as they are, through . . . *encountering tact*” (emphasis added). The formulation “as long as one can apprehend the reasons” (*yoki kotowari ni sae tsukamaeatareba*) implies both that one apprehends and that one *is apprehended by* reasons. Like a hunter wandering in a forest, tracing faint signs of game, tact entails trying to sense the “reasons” of nonhuman orders. To respond to the slightest sign, the hunter must *wait while searching*, all the while staying attentive to the motions and sounds of the world. Thus, tact can be seen as the limit point where that which one has consciously learned encounters worldly surprises that go beyond this learning. It concerns the cultivation of a receptive attitude toward the surprises of (nonhuman) things; even things that might lie hidden in plain view (Delaplace 2014: 54).

Even so, Minakata did not see tact as akin to the intuitions or inspirations of genius. As exemplified by the hunter, or the stonecutter who perfectly dresses a hand mill, all the while chatting with his friends, tact has practiced experience as a necessary condition. But, though necessary, practice itself is insufficient. While tact *can* emerge out of repeated practice, there is no guarantee that this will happen (Minakata 1951: 275–78; see also Gill 1998: 161–62; Figal 1999: 61).

In a famous example, Minakata describes a dream which foretold that he would find a particular slime mold, if he was to search around Mukōyama in the Nachi area. Following the dream, he visited the area in search of the mold. After engaging in a long fruitless search, he was forced to take a detour. Passing the imperial mausoleum of Kazan-tennō, the slime molds appeared before him (Minakata 1951: 280).

In writing about this chance encounter, Minakata does not claim that the dream *made him* find the molds. Indeed, he admits that a sufficiently careful explorer would probably have found them in any case. Crucially, however, he rejects any explanation based on “psychic addition.” There could be no issue of subconscious recollection, for example, since he had never even seen a real-life specimen of these molds before. Hence, “it was nothing other than ‘tact’” (*ibid.*) that enabled the discovery.

Minakata thus conceives of tact in the form of heightened attentiveness *induced* by his dream. He found the slime molds: “because I searched carefully, inspired by the revelation of a dream. . . . Considering the fact that there was nothing at Mukōyama, despite the dream [saying that] they must be there, this dream had no grounds and yet, also, was not strange” (Minakata 1951: 280–81). In other words, the dream revelation was not a direct cause (*in*) of his discovery. Rather, by providing an oblique clue, the dream set in motion a quest that attuned Minakata to the environment and intensified his perceptions. The dream and the tactful search it engendered were themselves components of *en*, indirect causes that related the traveling researcher, the mountainous fields, and the slime molds.

As the episode suggests, tact worked by modifying what was perceptible to Minakata in, and as, broader ecologies of practice (cf. Stengers 2005). And, in fact, Minakata was among the first to adopt the English term “ecology” in Japanese.<sup>14</sup>

14. Shin’ichi Nakazawa (1993: 295–329) has compared Minakata’s radically expanded concept of ecology to the arguments of Gregory Bateson and Félix Guattari.

Yet there was a Buddhist supplement to his translation and usage, for, in addition to human, animal and plant relationships, this ecology encompassed spiritual beings. Compared with Inoue and Yanagita, Minakata did not objectify such beings but aimed rather to sense them more subtly. Expanding beyond Western ideas of “natural” or “physical” surroundings, his ecology comprised the entire web of *in-nen*, and ultimately the great mystery, *daifushigi*, itself. In his critique of shrine mergers, for example, Minakata argued that, aside from harming natural habitats, the mergers also threatened “*kami*-worship,” by leading to enshrinement of shady beings like snakes and foxes (Minakata 1971: 573). Moreover, his letters and diary are peppered with experiences of nonhuman communication with ghosts, sympathetic encounters with forest creatures, and dreams about his late male lover (e.g., *ibid.*: 31–32; 1987: 57, 418–19, 421; see also Karasawa 2012a, 2012b). Indeed, he declared himself “a child of the deity of the old camphor tree of Fujishiro-ōji” (Minakata 1973: 411). Within this web, as Figal (1999: 62) summarizes, “tact begins to take shape as a tactic by which to tackle the intangibles . . . that must be taken into account in any model of causation in the human world.”

In spite of the invocations of mysterious communion, however, Minakata’s tact was not an antonym of reason. Instead, the intensified attention indexed by tact enabled a sense of “wonder” and “mystery,” which was integral to *an expanded reason*. This ontological tact resonates with Whitehead’s (1920: 163) observation that “delicacy of sense-apprehension means perception of objects as distinct entities, which are mere subtle ideas to cruder sensibilities.”

## Encounters beyond belief

In stark contrast with the epistemological and moral disjunction that Inoue posited between science and nonscience, Minakata depicted a world filled with surprising forms of agency—from slime molds to Dainichi Nyorai—working in webs of *en*. Rationalist science and institutionalized religion both come up short against such diverse forms of agency. Yet this is not because these entities are ultimately immaterial, disembodied, or unreal (rendered as beliefs). Rather, Minakata’s ontological tact, tallying with Shingon Buddhist notions, responds to a heterogeneous but mutually implicated cosmos. Rather than *disembodied*, this cosmos could be described as *superembodied*, since everything in it, even spiritual beings, has varied, and variable, corporeal forms.

Moreover, it is just because the entities woven in this cosmic web are so heterogeneous that empiricist or positivist methods for encountering them are inadequate. The notion of the “wondrous” itself marks the recognition that the bodies and environments of the world are so varied that they can be domesticated neither by scientific descriptions nor by lived experience in its conventional phenomenological guises.

As a living mandala, webs of *en* are at once transitory actualizations and immanent reasons of the great mystery. Contingent, and charged with transformative potential, this is anything but a static scheme of being. Rather than positing a fixed, dual relation between humans and divinities, depending on circumstantial arrangements almost everything may turn out to be either divine or mundane.

As we have seen, both Inoue and Yanagita considered spiritual beings as the results of people's collective imagination. This view embedded the assumption that the world transforms in tandem with people's mindsets. In contrast, Minakata considered the environment in terms of unstable networks of *innen*, encompassed by the great mystery. According to this view, entities are always surrounded by innumerable *en*, each of which has potential for evoking an event and affecting a person or thing. Whether the potentials of *en* are actualized or not depends on how one learns to be affected within the web:

Without cause (*in*), there is no effect (*ga*). And if the cause is different, then the effect also becomes different. *En* means that as one series of cause and effect (*inga*) continues, it is infiltrated by another series. The influence of *en* is called an occurrence (*ki*). . . . Therefore, various series of cause and effect continue in the body. At any moment, we encounter innumerable *en*. They can make occurrences happen, depending on how one minds them or how they touch one's body. Because of these occurrences, some causes and effects that were continuous until now move out of their orbit, while others return to their original path. (Minakata 1971: 391)<sup>15</sup>

As this difficult passage suggests, events beyond scientific cognition are captured neither by the dichotomy of "belief or disbelief" nor by that of "existence or nonexistence." Rather, the occurrence of such events is consequent upon having learned to be affected by different entities and relations within the webs of *en*. Within these webs, tact may change the orbit of causes that create occurrences, thereby rearranging the webs in turn. In the case of slime molds, one needs tact to notice them, while in the case of spirits, tact is required not only to notice but also to be noticed. In both cases, however, rather than aiming to bring one into contact with the world conceived as an already stabilized form of being, tact works by activating relations in a dynamic process of attunement.

### Activating spirit worlds

In this article, we have used Japanese materials as a test-site for experimenting with anthropological theory. Minakata's webs of *en* and *in*, and his sense of tact, we have argued, offer possibilities for an anthropological activation of spirit worlds. Such activation is premised on the possibility of modifying bodies, and their perceptual

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15. Minakata's notion of two intertwined causalities reminds us of Evans-Pritchard (1937). According to Evans-Pritchard, if a granary fell upon a particular man, the Azande would ask *why* two different series of causes (the granary collapsing and the man happening to sit under it) should intersect. Witchcraft (*mangu*) would then provide an explanation. For the Azande, witchcraft therefore worked as a shared "philosophy," which transformed mere coincidence into inevitability. While Minakata's tact has nothing to do with witchcraft per se, it describes a bodily and perceptual capacity for becoming aware of potential intertwinements, thus enabling desirable encounters and events. In this sense, though it is far broader, the idea bears resemblance to the skilled performances of artisans, hunters, or artists (e.g., Gell 1998; Ishii 2013).

and conceptual apparatuses, to make them receptive to typically imperceptible dimensions of being. Conferring on spirits and their worlds a degree of existence that they are often deprived of, Minakata's tact also offers a distinct vantage point for considering the question of relational and transformable ontologies.

Echoing a number of recent critiques, Peter Geschiere (2013: 170) has commented that ontological approaches, by emphasizing radical contrasts between worlds, are premised on a "vision of essential cultural difference." Yet, rather than worrying about the supposed essentialism of ontological approaches—supposed, since what we have described is a thoroughly temporal process of unpredictable modifications of people, spirits, and the webs they inhabit, *including the anthropologist*—we find it more problematic that it often appears as if everything one might want to say about spirits is really about something else. Anthropological contextualization, that is, almost always leads to a form of substitution, where peoples' minds, their economic systems, their political projects, or their social relations fill the place initially held by spirits. As these supposedly real realities replace the spirits, the latter are emptied of existence.

In one sense, there is no way around ventriloquizing spirits. This extends to the present argument too, for, after all, it is not spirits that are writing this text. Yet, we have tried to create an opening for conferring more agency and liveliness on spirits and their worlds. While we are sympathetic to analyses that show spirit worlds to be shaped by a whole range of forces—from language to economics and politics—we would like to provide further opportunities for spirits to add their own surprises.

Minakata has taught us that creating such opportunities requires resisting the bifurcation between reality and fiction. A brief detour to ancient Greece can further clarify what we mean by this. In Greek comedy, *parabasis* designated the time when the chorus, digressing from the storyline, directly addressed the audience. This was the point when reality—the outside—interfered directly in the play. Following this usage, the literary theorist Paul de Man offered a paradoxical definition of *permanent parabasis* as "the continual or omnipresent intrusion of the real into fiction" (Smyth 2002: 12). The paradox is that if parabasis is *permanent* so that reality *continuously* intrudes into fiction, then fiction is never wholly fictional. Indeed, the only fiction would be the idea of a "pure fiction" untouched by any reality at all.

Transposed to spirit worlds, the implication is that what is truly unreal is the idea that spirits lack any reality of their own. And indeed, in the twilight that fascinated Yanagita, the apparently real and the seemingly imagined blurred, compromising the distinction, and undermining the premise of a bifurcated world. Thus, the ontographic potentials of an anthropology of spirit worlds depend on activating the *apparently* fictitious.

Rather than unmasking, Minakata depicts a world of webs of causes, coincidences, diverse forms of corporeal modification and transformation. The "wondrous revelation" of entities and relations usually imperceptible depends on tact, which simultaneously describes a way of tuning in to usually imperceptible webs, tapping their potentials, and interfering with them.

Inflected by Minakata's tact, ontography, as we have used the term here, offers a way of characterizing the entire process of encountering particular forms of *en*, noticing unexpected occurrences, and experiencing/transforming webs of relations. As a kind of ontological attunement, tact operates at once as a lure, making hitherto

invisible beings and powers perceivable, and as a catalyst for transforming the web of *en* relations, and its implicated entities, including everything from slime molds to people and spiritual beings.

In our view, describing such transformations with as much ethnographic care as has been bestowed upon social, political, and economic forces would substantially enrich not only the anthropology of spirit worlds, but also anthropological understanding of relational ontologies and their transformations. Thus, we see on-tography as indicating a path forward for creating ethnographic and conceptual resonance between worlds usually held to be separate—or, often, held to not really exist at all.

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## S'accorder aux réseaux de l'en: ontographie, mondes des esprits au Japon et le "tact" de Minamata Kumagusu

Résumé : Cet article, à vocation expérimentale en matière de théorie ethnographique, tente d'éclairer sous un nouveau jour les mondes habités par les esprits au Japon. Afin d'éviter de laisser entendre que ce qui peuple vraiment les mondes des esprits sont des superstitions, le reflet de réalités socioéconomiques et de politiques, nous devons trouver des manières de regarder les esprits qui ne sont pas surdéterminées par la présupposition que ces entités n'existent pas: c'est là le réel enjeu "ontographique." Après avoir examiné les problématiques inspirées par les croyances présentes dans les études folkloriques sur le Japon et la "Monstrologie," nous nous arrêtons sur la pensée non-conformiste du scientifique Minikata Kumagusu. Dans ses travaux nous trouvons une perspective originale et proto-ontologique, particulièrement attentive aux rencontres pleines de tact et aux modes d'engagement harmonieux au sein des réseaux cosmiques de l'en.

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